

Catechists through Formation not by Default

The formation of catechists is one of the major responsibilities of the Church. Lucio Soravito, one of the outstanding contemporary authors on the formation of catechists states that nobody is born a catechist and nobody becomes a catechist by a spontaneous mutation¹. This means that those who are called to be catechists need to be trained for this ecclesial ministry. Catechists are facilitators who need to be trained before actually entering into this ministry because the development of those capabilities, qualities and skills which are indispensable for evangelisation can only be acquired through an organised itinerary of formation.

Bearing this in mind, catechist formation can be defined as the process by which those who are called to be educators for the faith are trained to fulfil their mission. However, the process of formation is not a magical process which by itself enables the catechist to overcome all the difficulties met during the process of catechesis. In fact, Jean-Luc Blaquant confirms this by claiming that “formation is a journey which demands hard work, energy and discernment.”²

There may be numerous motivations for which catechists may seek to nourish themselves through formation. Amongst these motivations one can find reasons such

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¹ Lucio Soravito, “Catechista (formazione),” in *Dizionario di Catechetica* (Torino, 1987), 128-130.

² Jean-Luc Blaquant, “Formarsi: perché? Come?,” in *Tabor: L'enciclopedia dei catechisti* (Milano, 1995), 261.

as to enhance the transmission of the Good News; to resolve common problems encountered within the catechetical ministry; to reflect upon different types of pedagogy which are actually being used and new ones which can be applied; personal interest in some particular aspect of formation; taking on a new responsibility; overcoming the idea of not being adequately prepared for the task; and even to please one's superiors.

However, before embarking on the process of forming catechists, we primarily need to come to terms with a number of difficulties which the different local churches are encountering today. The first difficulty is the lack of catechists. It seems that today, many of the faithful are not considering this ministry seriously within the Church. As a result, it is often the case that we do not have enough catechists. What can one do in such a situation? One can recruit catechists in a management-by-crisis way, leading to a situation where we have a number of catechists who are not prepared for their ministry. In the Maltese local context, this has been solved by preparing a number of catechists called *relievers*. These catechists are always in attendance so that when a catechist cannot make it because of ill-health, or any other serious reason, they may take over with the least of interruption possible. Such contingency plans are necessary today.

Moreover, there seems to be an arising tension between parishes and the diocesan institution responsible for catechesis when the chosen catechists are not adequate. This may be the case where we have catechists who are not true witnesses of the Word which they proclaim. In this work, I do not intend to discuss or study the qualities which are required for a person to be given the ministry of a catechist, but these should be taken into consideration when choosing the right persons to become catechists.

We may also encounter catechists who, for some reason or other, resist formation. Can such persons be allowed to represent the Church in the catechetical ministry? What should be our reaction in such a situation? Notwithstanding all these unanswered questions, the most important question which we need to answer is: What should be our reaction when there is no way out of these difficulties? Should we continue or stop?

The *General Directory for Catechesis*, 233 (GDC) explicitly declares that the pastoral care of catechists amongst other things entails both basic training and the on-going formation of catechists. The need for catechist formation arises out of their very prophetic vocation as evangelisers and as people who are dedicated

to the ministry of the Word. Any form of pastoral ministry is definitely “placed at risk if it does not rely on truly competent and trained personnel.”³ Otherwise, there will be a great probability of failure either due to burnout as a result of a lack of knowledge, or else due to panic when facing difficulties which may arise from time to time.

For an effective catechesis, catechists need to be trained in order to achieve a higher human and Christian maturity themselves. It is after this endeavour has been successfully achieved that they can help others to mature both on a human and on a Christian level. The best way of helping catechists to achieve human and Christian maturity is by formation in *being*. This makes catechists aware of their special vocation within the community. The GDC explicitly states that the catechist is a mediator whose specific role is the education for the faith. It is therefore indispensable for catechists to know the message which is to be proclaimed, and at the same time know both the interlocutors and the socio-cultural context in which they live. These issues form the backbone of the catechist’s formation in *knowing*. However catechists cannot be satisfied with knowing the essential contents of the faith, they must also be equipped with the right methodological, didactic, communicational and organisational techniques. The catechist’s formation in *savoir-faire* is founded on these elements.

The itinerary which I am proposing in this paper may be somewhat back-breaking especially when one considers that the age spectrum of catechists, which in the Maltese context is quite high. Most of the catechists are old-age pensioners who try to do something worthwhile in the free time which they have now acquired as a result of their age. One may ask: But are you not burdening them with too much? Are you not asking too much of them? My reaction to such questions would be that being a catechist is not merely being able to fill in a gap of time with something religious. Knowing that time is so precious today, we cannot afford to waste the time of our interlocutors. This means that catechists need to be well-prepared so that they make the most of the time which they spend with their interlocutors. Catechists are not simply asked to impart just a series of doctrinal statements or facts but they must speak about their experience

³ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997), 234.

of the Christian life in ways which are intelligible to the interlocutors. Moreover they must help their interlocutors to read their experience in the light of the faith as well.⁴

Formation in “Being”

The effectiveness of the process of educating for the faith depends largely on how much catechists are faithful witnesses to what they teach. One must bear in mind that the contemporary society is ready to listen more to witnesses rather than to teachers. Catechists must be able to put the Christian message into practice in their daily lives and actions before speaking about the message.⁵ Formation in *being* is a recent development in the formation of catechists. In the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory* next to nothing is said about the identity of catechists and of the relevance of their ministry.

The deepest dimension in the formation of the catechist is formation in *being*, that is, in the catechist’s self-awareness as a person with a special vocation. This dimension of formation helps the catechist to mature as a person, as a believer and as an apostle because “this is what the catechist must know so as to be able to fulfil his[/her] responsibilities well.”⁶ This human, Christian and apostolic maturity must be visible in the way in which the catechist relates to the interlocutors being accompanied during catechesis.

Formation in *being* helps catechists to become concerned with their specific identity and mission: the particular vocation, spirituality and the fundamental characteristics which constitute their distinctiveness. Therefore, formation in *being* helps catechists to develop into more humanly mature persons, to develop a deep ecclesial spirituality and to be conscious of their apostolic mission.

The Catechist’s Vocation

All Christians are called to be catechists and are catechists by virtue of the Sacraments of Baptism and of Confirmation. Through these sacraments they

⁴ Emilio Alberich and Jerome Vallabaraj speak about this process in great detail. See Emilio Alberich, Jerome Vallabaraj, *Communicating a Faith that Transforms. A Handbook of Fundamental Catechetics* (Bangalore, 2004), 103-114; Emilio Alberich, *La catechesi oggi. Manuale di catechetica fondamentale* (Leumann-Torino, 2001), 107-118.

⁵ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 76.

⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 238.

partake in the prophetic mission of the Church and the proclamation of the Gospel. Notwithstanding this, there are persons who receive a specific call to be catechists within the people of God. This vocation is a call to serve the people of God with an unshakeable faith and commitment, and it is both a gift and a grace given by God.

Joseph Colomb gave an invaluable contribution to catechetics through his pastoral and pedagogical reflections. In this respect, he can be considered as a pioneer and a forerunner in the ministerial and vocational aspect of the formation of catechists. He asserts that every vocation is a result of a dynamic interaction between three aspects: an exterior aspect – the perception of a social need or lack; a personal aspect – a wish born within the person to answer to the need; and a formal acceptance by a person in authority. These three aspects taken from social life can also be applied to the vocation of the catechist.

The Christian community is constantly demanding a more explicit education for the faith. This means that the community is implicitly appealing for more catechists.⁷ There are some individuals who, being sensitive to this need, respond by taking active roles in catechesis. In this process the authority of the Church becomes active in discerning the request which the Christian community is making for more catechists, and in encouraging new catechists while discerning their vocation and organising all the catechetical activity.

The process of formation helps catechists to become conscious of their particular identity and specific vocation: to go and serve the people of God. In this respect the catechist is given a mandate to evangelise the people of God. The catechist must be able to stand side by side with the interlocutors and to listen to their appeals and address their needs directly.

⁷ See Joseph Colomb, *Al servizio della fede. Manuale di catechetica* (Leumann-Torino, 1970), 2:721-724. André Fossion claims that to educate the community for the faith, it is not enough to have good catechists. He maintains that the community, aware of its responsibility in proclaiming the Word of God, must be a community engaged in catechesis and in the proclamation of the Good News through its way of living. Therefore, it is not only the endeavours of the catechists which are necessary to educate a community for the faith, but the community itself plays a significant part (See André Fossion, “Vers des communautés catéchisées. Une reconstruction de la catéchèse en temps de crise,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 126 (2004): 598-613.

The catechist's vocation is endowed by a number of requisites which need to be developed during formation. These pre-requisites can be summed up in what is referred to as *apostolic consciousness*. This apostolic consciousness presupposes that the catechist is primarily a disciple of Christ, who has a specific role as a witness, a mediator and an educator for the Christian faith while being a companion for the journey and a missionary.

The catechist is more than a teacher. The catechist's vocation entails a call to announce the Good News and to educate for the faith by sharing experiences of the faith. By doing so the catechist is a witness through daily actions. Although this is not an easy task, all the other abilities of the catechist – psychological, sociological, pedagogical and communicational – are futile if a faithful witness to the Christian faith is lacking. Catechist formation in *being* helps the catechist to become a more authentic witness to the Christian faith.

The process of formation helps catechists to realise that they have not yet attained the highest possible grade of perfection in the catechetical ministry. They are still on a journey as disciples who still fatigue to discover and understand the Word of God in our contemporary world and in their personal lives. It is in virtue of the fact that catechists are disciples, that they are sent to proclaim the Good News. The catechist's discipleship is cultivated through moments of personal prayer, of listening to the Word of God, and by keeping in touch with the ecclesial community especially through communion with ecclesiastical leaders.

Being a disciple the catechist is still on a journey together with the other fellow Christians. Through formation in *being*, catechists are helped to recognise that they are on a journey towards the Kingdom of God together with others. Because of this the catechist needs to be knowledgeable in the characteristics of modern culture and of the different conditions which can be encountered during the journey. The catechist proves to be helpful by encouraging others not to close in upon themselves, but to keep their eyes fixed on the goal they want to achieve, even though at times this may seem very obscure or impossible to reach.

The catechist is a mediator who is responsible for facilitating communication between God and the human being, between the interlocutors themselves, and between the particular group and the Christian community at large. It is because of this that the catechist's "cultural vision, social condition and lifestyle must not

be obstacles to the journey of faith. Rather, these [should] help to create the most advantageous conditions for seeking out, welcoming and deepening the Christian message.”⁸

The specific witness that catechists are called to give centres around the fact that they have been sent to announce the Good News of the love of God. The catechist accompanies the interlocutors by helping them to overcome the obstacles they encounter on the way. In this respect, the catechist is a person who sheds light on the daily experiences of the human being and interprets these in the light of the message of the Gospel, thus acknowledging the relevance of the Christian faith to daily life.

The catechist is called to be an educator of the entire life of the interlocutors by helping them to make an integral and complete Christian experience. The catechist is not called to impart a series of concepts to others but to help them to perceive God’s presence in their lives and daily experiences. In this respect, the catechist has a prophetic mission by helping the interlocutors to live a life of faith, hope and charity, of social justice, of service to others, of courage, of self-control and a responsible life. The development of this prophetic dimension cannot be left to chance but requires a good preparation on behalf of the catechist.

Human Maturity

Catechist formation in *being* helps the catechist to become more humanly mature, thus developing a sense of responsibility and a critical outlook, the ability to dialogue with others and to love those whom they are called to educate. The catechist needs a number of basic human qualities which can then be developed further through formation. Only when a considerable level of human maturity has been reached can the catechist be prolific in catechesis. The question remains about what we actually mean by human maturity. Do we all have the same standards, or do different local churches adopt different standards and measures for human maturity? When is a person considered as mature? Such questions make it very difficult to decide on whether a person is mature enough to be entrusted with the catechetical ministry. In this paper I am not going into details about the different criteria which render a person mature because this is a very

⁸ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 156.

complex issue. I am just going to mention the most salient aspects of human maturity which are absolutely necessary for catechesis.

Human maturity acquired through formation in *being* should help the catechist to develop healthy human relationships with others, thus the ability to accept every new relationship as a gift of God, to possess an interior silence in order to be able to appreciate others and not jump to conclusions hastily, and the ability to live every relation in a renewed and interdependent way while remaining open to new experiences. The question of experience presents a new dilemma when choosing catechists. Which is the adequate age at which a person can become a catechist? A very young age can be detrimental because the person may lack sufficient human experiences, thus becoming a stumbling block to the catechist when coming to interpret human experiences in the light of the faith. Moreover, the terminology to be used may also present the interlocutors with problems.

Through these relational qualities developed through human formation, the catechist is able to initiate and to sustain deep personal relations with the interlocutors, stimulating a positive atmosphere which helps each member of the group to be appreciated and be at ease during the meetings. Here, we cannot neglect the reality about which the Church has become very aware in the last decades. Here, I am referring to the potential space for abuse with the interlocutors. Such abuse may not only be of a sexual nature, but may also include moral and corporal abuse amongst others. The creation and development of a sincere relation between the catechist and the interlocutors, the upkeep of good working relations with other catechists, and the ability to engage positively in human relations with other significant adults are indispensable relational qualities which the catechist needs to know how to develop.

Human maturity helps the catechist to develop both a paternal and a maternal love. As in our daily lives we need two role models – the father figure and the mother figure – so also in catechesis. “The awareness of being a son, the sturdiness of a father, the tenderness of a mother leads the catechist to humanise and to render more Christian those persons whom he [/she] meets, primarily by his [/her] lifestyle and witness rather than by words.”⁹

⁹ Angelo De Simone, “Identità paterna e materna del catechista,” *Via Verità e Vita* 53, no. 196 (2004):35 (author’s translation).

As in our everyday lives, it is not we who choose our parents, nor are the parents who choose their children, the same occurs in catechesis. It is not the catechist who chooses the interlocutors, but they are a gift of God in one's life. Just as parents love their children whole-heartedly, and are ready to help them in any way possible, so are catechists called to help their interlocutors as much as possible by walking with them in their walk of life, sustaining them, forgiving them when things do not go as planned, and never tiring from helping them to fine-tune their life experiences.

Christian Maturity

Fruit reaches its maturity when it is ripe. But can we as human being ever achieve Christian maturity, or be satisfied with the level of maturity we have achieved? This is such a difficult endeavour that we need to admit that fruit reaches maturity before we can ever be satisfied with having reached Christian maturity. It is for this reason that formation in *being* also strives to help catechists achieve Christian maturity.

Emilio Alberich and Jerome Vallabaraj elaborate on what being a mature Christian today entails. Amongst other qualities they maintain that a mature Christian person today needs to have a personal faith based on a free adhesion to the faith; a faith which is not alienated from culture, but embedded within culture; a faith that helps in the transformation of others; a deep and balanced *sensus ecclesiae*; a faith which can be seen in the individual's spirit of communion with others; a faith which has taken on an ethical commitment towards others and the world, and a faith which is able to enter into an inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue with others.¹⁰

The question still remains about what to do with those who have not yet achieved a sufficient Christian maturity. On what basis should such persons be withheld from serving the Church as catechists?

Loyalty to the Church

The catechist's vocation and mission call for a particular spirituality. "Catechists must have a deep spirituality, i.e. they must live in the Spirit, who will help them to

¹⁰ See Alberich, Vallabaraj, *Communicating a Faith that Transforms*, 136-138; Alberich, *La catechesi oggi*, 143-146.

renew themselves continually in their specific vocation.”¹¹ The catechist’s spirituality is embedded within the Christian spirituality and a part of it. The catechist’s spirituality is a deepening and a strengthening of the Christian spirituality in those aspects that render catechists more proficient in their specific vocation.

Catechists who are engaged in contemporary catechesis must constantly renew themselves and be open to new difficulties which may arise. The catechist needs to remain open to new ways of doing things. This means that the catechist is engaged in a process of continual discernment while feeling at one with the Christian community.

The catechist who desires to educate and lead others to Christian maturity needs to have a deep spiritual life first. This is a very important aspect of the catechist’s identity and consequently it must be stressed more during formation. The spirituality that animates the catechist should be centred upon listening to the Word of God and the discipleship of Christ. The catechist must be always open to God. Such openness to God is authentic if it is established on the love of the Father, it seeks communion with Christ and it allows itself to be formed by the Holy Spirit.

The catechist acts in the name of the whole Church. The words of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* bear a lot of significance:

Evangelization is for no one an individual and isolated act; it is one that is deeply ecclesial. When the most obscure preacher, catechist or pastor in the most distant land preaches the Gospel, gathers his little community together or administers a sacrament, even alone, he is carrying out an ecclesial act, and his action is certainly attached to the evangelizing activity of the whole Church by institutional relationships, but also by profound invisible links in the order of grace. This presupposes that he acts not in virtue of a mission which he attributes to himself or by a personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name.¹²

In the accomplishment of their responsibilities catechists do not simply reproduce a number of doctrines but they are witnesses of the Church and

¹¹ Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists. Document of Vocational, Formative and Promotional Orientation of Catechists in the Territories Dependent on the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples* (3 December 1993), 6.

¹² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 60, 76; see also Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists*, 26.

of the mystery proclaimed by the Church. One can say that catechists are the spokespersons of the Ecclesial community in that they speak in the name of the Church by virtue of the specific mandate they received. The fact that catechists are stewards of God's message implies fidelity to the message and an unreserved communion with the Church in such a way that they participate in the life of the Church in general, and in the life of the community in particular. The catechist demonstrates the authenticity of the message by nourishing a profound ecclesial spirituality. However, we need to say that this cannot be done at the expense of being unfaithful to the human being.

The catechist's ecclesial spirituality is developed through personal prayer and meditation, through active participation in the Sacraments and in the life of the community, and by the discernment of the Christian experience. These help the catechist to acquire a sense of belonging to the ecclesial community, thus incorporating the catechist in a responsible manner in the life of the community. A profound ecclesial spirituality also helps the catechist to engage in a process of spiritual discernment with the community even in difficult moments which the community encounters.

Formation in "Knowing"

Catechists must have a thorough and organic knowledge of the Christian faith which they are called to proclaim to others. The theological formation of the catechist is entirely based on the Word of God without neglecting other significant sources such as the Magisterium of the Church and the particular texts used for catechesis. After undergoing this biblico-theological formation the catechist is not expected to be a professional theologian but will have a thorough knowledge of those themes which are necessary for catechesis.

The catechist needs a working knowledge of the human sciences because these endow catechists with knowledge about the contemporary socio-cultural milieu and of the frame of mind of the contemporary human being. These themes are treated in the sociological field of study. The catechist also needs to have a basic knowledge of the traits of the interlocutors. Here the psychological domain prevails. Just as in the biblico-

theological domain, catechists do not become expert psychologists or sociologists after undergoing the process of formation. The catechist's formation in *knowing* can be grouped under three areas: biblico-theological formation; liturgical and sacramental formation; and anthropological formation.

Biblico-Theological Formation

Catechesis draws its contents from the Word of God. It is based on the Sacred Scriptures and on the Tradition of the Church. It is therefore indispensable for the catechist to have “an organic awareness of the Christian message”¹³ because “the person who becomes a disciple of Christ has the right to receive ‘the word of faith’ not in a mutilated, falsified, or diminished form but whole and entire, in all its rigour and vigour.”¹⁴ Biblico-theological formation is aimed at giving the catechist a comprehensive view of the Christian faith. The catechist has to be able to announce the Good News in such a way that the message proclaimed allows the interlocutors to make personal decisions according to their level of maturity.¹⁵

The catechist's biblico-theological formation consists of a summary of the Christian message which is structured in such a way that the hierarchy of truths is respected. It needs to help catechists to mature in the faith by offering them a logical explanation for the hope which they have. It needs to be related to human experience allowing the person to cross-examine daily experiences in the light of the Christian faith; and it must be delivered in a way that the catechist can understand it clearly and explain it in a comprehensible way to others.

Every proclamation of the Word of God is aimed at an interior reception of the message. The message is positively accepted when the catechist reflects upon the core of

¹³ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 240.

¹⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 30.

¹⁵ In this respect, Joseph Colomb in a conference held in Paris in 1957 maintained that it is possible to speak of a mature faith in every season of the human being's life because what constitutes a mature faith is the fact that one's faith responds positively to the grace received from God. In this sense, living one's faith to the full is possible throughout the whole of one's life. Consequently, Colomb claimed that it is possible to have a mature faith in childhood, during adolescence, in adulthood and even when an old age is reached. See Joseph Colomb, “Enfants des hommes et enfants de Dieu,” in *Foi d'enfant...Foi d'adulte. Nos Responsabilités de Catéchistes. Les Actes du deuxième Congrès National de l'Enseignement Religieux. Paris 24, 25 et 26 Avril 1957* (Dijon, 1957), 57.

the message, thus discovering the significance of the message and its particular purpose. This leads catechists to enquire about the core which they are called to announce and the way to proclaim it keeping in mind the worries and the sufferings of the contemporary human being.

Biblico-theological formation is usually divided into two parts: the history of salvation and the fundamental nuclei of the Christian message. In the history of salvation, the fundamental moments of the history of salvation, the mission and the identity of Jesus Christ, the centrality of the mystery of Easter; and reading, interpreting correctly and putting into practice the most important biblical texts constitute the major areas. The fundamental nuclei of the Christian message look at the significance and the structure of the Church throughout its history, the essential dogmas of the Christian faith, the liturgy and the sacraments, prayer life, Christian morality, ecumenism, and dialogue with the human sciences.

When considering all this, one might get the impression that catechesis seems to be the mere imparting of doctrine found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to the interlocutors. Such an outlook is to the detriment of catechesis. Catechesis is much more than this. Many catechists still have the impression that catechesis exists simply to teach doctrine to the interlocutors in a rote-learning way, while neglecting human experience totally. As we have already mentioned, catechesis is aimed at helping interlocutors to read their human experiences in the light of the faith. This constitutes the echoing of human experiences in the light of the Word of God, thus demonstrating how God does actually bring a change in the life of the human being.

History has shown us time and again that knowledge of the contents alone does not help the person to achieve this attitude of reading one's experiences in the light of the Word of God.¹⁶ This has been the cause of great difficulties throughout the ages because progressive catechists and veteran catechists do not agree about what should be delivered during catechesis, and how it should be delivered. However, one thing is certain: the contents give the bare minimum and are very arid for the Christian life. The same applies for the following paragraph which deals with the liturgical and sacramental formation of catechists.

¹⁶ See Carl-Mario Sultana, "Catechesis in Europe during the 20th Century," in *Sophia - Paideia. Sapienza e educazione (Sir1,27). Miscellanea di studi offerti in onore del Prof. Don Mario Cimosà*, ed. Gillian Bonney, Rafael Vicent, Nuova biblioteca scienze religiose 34 (Roma, 2012), 423-450.

Liturgical and Sacramental Formation

The liturgy is one of the sources of the message proclaimed in catechesis.¹⁷ Liturgical education is also one of the objectives of catechesis both as education for the faith and for participating fully in the life of the Church:

The Church ardently desires that all the Christian faithful be brought to that full, conscious and active participation which is required by the very nature of the liturgy and the dignity of the baptismal priesthood. For this reason, catechesis, along with promoting a knowledge of the meaning of the liturgy and the sacraments, must also educate the disciples of Jesus Christ “for prayer, for thanksgiving, for repentance, for praying with confidence, for community spirit, for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds...”, as all of this is necessary for a true liturgical life.¹⁸

To achieve this, the endeavours of the catechist are necessary to explain the meaning of liturgical signs and to educate for those attitudes and aptitudes which are necessary to participate actively in the liturgy. Through liturgical formation the catechist obtains a renewed vision of the sacraments and their celebration in the Church. The catechist needs to be able to educate others to understand signs coming from God and to use these signs to enter into a relationship with Him. In this respect the catechist helps the interlocutors to discover the active presence of God in the liturgy.

Anthropological Formation

The need to study the human sciences arises out of the fact that the Word of God must be constantly inculturated into cultural context in which the contemporary human being is living. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* clearly states that:

evangelisation loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.¹⁹

¹⁷ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 95.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63; see also John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 53.

Knowledge of the human sciences in this context is not intended to designate that catechists become professionals in all aspects of the human sciences but that they need to be aware of those human sciences which are necessary for an effective proclamation of the Word of God. In the past, knowledge of the human sciences was neglected in the formation of catechists. However, the process of inculturation should never mutilate the message or radically change the original meaning intended by the message in order to make it more acceptable. Catechesis must always remain faithful to God and faithful to the human being. This means “listening to the good news with the worries, questions, candidness, difficulties and the uncertainties of the listeners. It means looking at the gospel from their point of view and mind-set.”²⁰

The introduction of the anthropological and of the human sciences in the formation of catechists is not based on arbitrary criteria but on a set of guiding principles. The autonomy of the social and of the human sciences must be totally respected. They must never be manipulated in order to legitimate hidden agendas or points of view. Moreover, not all that can be deduced from the different schools of thought in the anthropological and in the human sciences can be applied equally to the catechetical sphere. These sciences have their values and their limitations. This calls those who are in charge of the formation of catechists to embark on a process of evangelical discernment of the different schools of thought and of their possible application to the sphere of catechetics. This means that the study of the human sciences during catechist formation courses is not an end in itself, but it is addressed towards the maturation of the human being in the faith.

Therefore, the study of the human and of the anthropological sciences is carried out in view of helping the interlocutors to become better prepared to accept God. This ultimately implies that both the human sciences and catechetics mutually enrich each other and that the anthropological and the human sciences can never neglect criteria from the catechetical sphere and become the only source for the pedagogy of the faith. The human and the anthropological sciences always remain at the service of evangelisation and never the goal of evangelisation.

²⁰ Conferenza Episcopale Italiana - Ufficio Catechistico Nazionale, *Orientamenti e itinerari di formazione dei catechisti* (Bologna, 1991), 13 (author's translation).

Catechist formation in the anthropological sciences includes several aspects. Primarily, the catechist should be knowledgeable of the fundamental elements of psychology. Knowing the fundamental psychological characteristics of the interlocutors helps the catechist to concentrate more on their basic needs.

A major area which falls under the catechist's anthropological formation is the study of the contemporary socio-cultural context in which catechesis will be taking place. Knowledge of the socio-cultural context is necessary because as human beings, both catechists and the interlocutors live in a particular social context which heavily influences not only their decisions but also their outlook and vision of the world and of society. There is a great difference between conducting catechesis in an environment where there is peace and harmony, and in a social context which is characterised by violence or by a constant threat of war. While in the latter, the basic social need of the human being is survival, in the former this basic need is not only satisfied but taken for granted. In such a context there are different social needs which are probably more sophisticated and demanding. Through the study of the socio-cultural context, catechists get a clearer notion of contemporary cultural tendencies, social problems and ideologies through a correct understanding and interpretation of the signs of the times.

Anthropological formation in the socio-cultural sphere helps the catechist to know more about the deepest aspirations of the human being and of the experiences which out of their very nature induce the human being to reach out to the Transcendent. The catechist who knows what the deepest desires of the human being are, and who is conscious of the fact that the human being by his very nature has a predisposition towards God can use these to recommend God as the solution to the deepest desires of the contemporary human being.

Formation in “*Savoir-faire*”

It is not enough for catechists to have a good grasp of the contents of the Christian faith; they must also be equipped with the right instruments through which the transmission of the Christian message can be effected in a clear and efficient way. There are myriad definitions of what a method is. Michele Pellerey defines *method* as “a

programme or an itinerary which one must follow in order to achieve valid and reliable results in any particular sector of study or action.”²¹

There are several methods which can help the catechist to proclaim the Good News. However, not all methods can be used during catechesis. At the basis of the choice of the method there always lies “the principle of ‘fidelity to God and fidelity to the human person’”²² because this leads to avoiding any opposition between method and content. The ability to choose a good catechetical method is a guarantee of fidelity to the content.

The catechist has to facilitate communication. Consequently the catechist needs to know how to communicate the message and to have a sufficient knowledge of the methods and techniques which can be used to transmit the message in a good way whilst remaining attentive to the needs of the interlocutors.

The *General Catechetical Directory* (1971) and the GDC mention several of these methods: inductive and deductive methods, the use of human experience, memorization, stimulating activity and creativity, and appealing to the group. Moreover, the GDC adds the necessity of the witness of the Christian community as another method in catechesis together with the means of social communication. Catechists also need to know how to organise and plan the different educational interventions and to evaluate the results of these educational endeavours.

Pedagogical and Didactic Formation

The catechist can never be happy with knowing the contents of the message well and with knowing the interlocutors and the socio-cultural milieu in which they live because “from the moment that catechesis is the ‘communication’ of a message and the activation of an educational process, he [/she] has to have a pedagogical and didactic knowledge.”²³

Knowing the contents of a particular subject is not sufficient for imparting a good education. The catechist must also be able to communicate the contents related to the

²¹ Michele Pellerey, “Metodo,” in *Dizionario di scienze dell’educazione* (Torino, 1997), 689-690

²² Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 149.

²³ Lucio Soravito, “La formazione dei catechisti. Analisi della prassi oggi in Italia,” in *Formare i catechisti negli anni ottanta*, ed. Istituto di Catechetica - Università Pontificia Salesiana (Leumann-Torino, 1982), 31.

education for the faith, and be flexible in adapting the process to the interlocutors. This ensures better overall results. This is probably the most difficult aspect met during the process of catechesis because the catechist has to organise all the process in a coherent way taking into account several variables: the content of the message, the psychological and social conditions of the interlocutors, the ecclesial context, different teaching methods which can be used, the type of language and interaction to be used.

The catechist is an educator whose responsibility is to educate towards a mature faith. In this respect, the catechist must also be aware of the original pedagogy of the faith. Education for the faith is not just a mere human endeavour. The grace of God plays a very important role: catechesis “does not confuse the salvific action of God, which is pure grace, with the pedagogical action of man. Neither, however, does it oppose them or separate them. The wonderful dialogue that God undertakes with every person becomes its inspiration and norm.”²⁴

The catechist is called to facilitate the development of the faith by nourishing it and helping it to grow in several ways which include proclaiming the Good News in a faithful and creative way by narrating the wonders of God and by using techniques which aid the reception of the message, by being attentive to the needs of the interlocutors and being flexible in the co-ordination of the whole programme. The catechist must have the ability to animate a group towards maturity, and to take the initiative and be creative in organising learning activities using different techniques such as through a specific proclamation, through dialogue and through interpersonal communication, through a community experience and by fellowship with other Christians, through solidarity and service to others.

A sound knowledge of modern pedagogies and of didactic techniques is necessary if we want our catechists to communicate with their interlocutors on the same wavelength and in ways which are intelligible to them. Which are the pedagogies which should be presented to catechists today? This question opens to us a myriad of pedagogies which can be used. I am going to limit myself to mention that whatever pedagogy is used, it should always be an interlocutor-centred pedagogy which should not be focussed on

²⁴ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 144.

the contents to be transmitted but on those who are at the receiving end.²⁵ Moreover, the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach needs to be demonstrated during the process of the formation of catechists.

One must also not be satisfied with having a good knowledge of contemporary pedagogies, because in catechesis one must also apply several didactic techniques. These offer catechists a wide range of possibilities which facilitate the transmission of the message. Amongst others, during the process of formation, catechists need to be made aware and feel confident with didactic techniques such as questioning and discussion techniques; storytelling and narration; images; film and video; the use of drama; group work; music and song; round table meetings; the design and constant updating of websites; and communication through email.²⁶ The best way to do this would be to use them during the process of formation itself and thus show their benefits through experience. One can also add the use of multimedia and computer slide-show presentation. However, these will be discussed later as communication techniques.

Programming and Organisational Techniques

The programming of any activity involves the choice and the organisation of a plan of action in a co-ordinated manner, thus recalling the idea of a strategy as opposed to improvisation and spontaneity. The ability to elaborate a programme denotes the capacity of developing a guided educational itinerary using particular strategies. It also implies the ability to evaluate and adapt the programme from time to time according to necessity.

The GDC clearly states that as a result of formation in *savoir-faire*, catechists must be able to elaborate realistic catechetical plans and to evaluate them critically after having

²⁵ Here, one can mention the Constructivist Approach which focuses on the needs of the interlocutors. The interlocutor is more in control of his/her formation and proactive within the process. The Constructivist Approach favours hands-on activity to promote a higher order of thinking, and the taking on of a more active role. Moreover, discussions are expanded and branch off from the main topic. For more information on the Constructivist Approach, see Jacqueline Grennon Brooks, Martin G. Brooks, *In Search of Understanding. The Case for Constructivist Classrooms* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2001); Thomas M. Duffy, David H. Jonassen, *Constructivism and the Technology of Instruction. A Conversation* (New York-London, 1992).

²⁶ See Cionchi, 1999.

executed them. The catechist can be initially helped to do this by a more experienced catechist so that coherence and continuity in the process of education for the faith can be guaranteed throughout the catechetical activity.

The process of elaborating a programme involves a number of stages. First, one has to identify the needs of the interlocutors while taking into consideration influential socio-cultural factors. Then one has to define the goals being aimed at. To arrive at these goals one has to organise the activities which need to be performed. The activities can be further defined by identifying methods, materials and other aids which can be used. The process of elaborating a programme terminates by evaluating the results both during and after the programme has been carried out.

The fact that today there are many textbooks, catechetical aids and itineraries releases the catechist from the burden of having to determine the programme. Notwithstanding this, catechists must be creative and try to adapt the programme to their particular group. It is exactly for this particular aspect of programming and organisation that catechists need to be helped and trained.

Communication Techniques

The catechist engaged in a catechetical itinerary is engaged in an act of communication. Therefore it is indispensable for catechists to know how to communicate the message which has been entrusted to them by the Church. It is by being a communicator that the catechist is also an educator of the human being and of the life of the human being.

Our century is characterized by the mass media or means of social communication, and the first proclamation, catechesis or the further deepening of faith cannot do without these means.... The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect.²⁷

The use of the means of the social communication media is rendered even more important today since our age can be rightly referred to as *the age of images*. The media can, in fact, be considered as the new 'paradigms' of contemporary society because they are able to help the Word of God to penetrate into the daily life of the human being. The

²⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 45.

documents of the Church have usually referred to the means of social communication as an Areopagus of the modern world. Verbal communication proves insufficient for the proclamation of the Good News of salvation to the contemporary human being. It is very difficult or nearly impossible to educate for the faith without using the means of social communication. It is therefore necessary to perceive the importance of the media because “in every well-planned catechesis, such aids cannot be absent.”²⁸

The use of audio-visual aids during catechesis is also encouraged due to the particular qualities of these communication media. They offer both new resources and new methods of teaching: they facilitate comprehension – an image can persuade much more than words can; they help in memorization – using an image one can help the interlocutor to remember a notion briskly and for a longer period of time; they help the interlocutors to identify with role models and to imitate them; and they help the interlocutors to look for details while retaining their attention for much longer spans of time. The catechist needs to be trained in the use of these audio-visual aids because “good use of the media requires of catechists a series commitment to knowledge, competence, training and up-to-date use of them.”²⁹

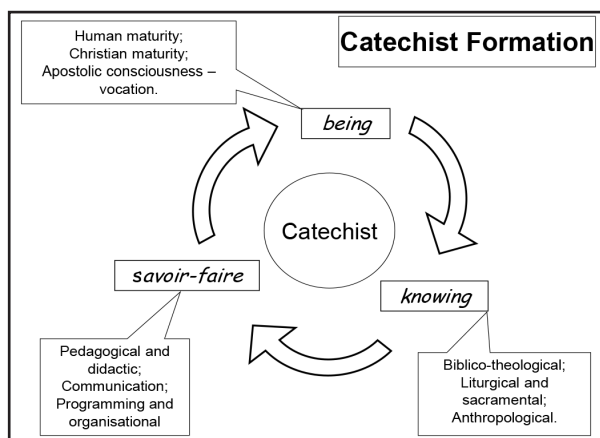
While catechists need to be proficient in the use of the modern media, they must not neglect other communication techniques and methods which are necessary for a good catechesis: basic communication and public speaking skills, verbal and non-verbal communication techniques, together with knowing how to be creative. The catechist should be able to decipher the opportune time to use the media and to use them with a critical outlook, thus knowing how to read and how to interpret signs coming from the communications media. This implies knowing how to operate the basic media – how to playback a DVD, photocopy articles and file them, sort photos by categories, operate a computer, preparing and presenting slide shows, and use CD-ROMs and audio CDs.

Conclusion

A holistic vision of catechist formation can be summarised by considering it under the three classical dimensions of formation in *being*, formation in *knowing* and

²⁸ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 160.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.



formation in *savoir-faire*. These three dimensions can be schematically represented thus: one must not think that the catechist who undergoes an itinerary of formation becomes an expert straight away. Just as a medical doctor becomes proficient in his profession through practice and experience, so does the catechist become better by time, experience and practice. As a solution to this, one may suggest that new catechists should be helped in the early years of their ministry by being mentored by more experienced catechists. This would provide new catechists with a point of reference for when difficulties and problems in their ministry are encountered. Still, this is not an easy endeavour. In our contemporary time, it may prove very difficult to find the right persons who are proficient in all these areas and dimensions even after having undergone the process of catechist formation.

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